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# Affect and the sociology of race: A program for critical inquiry

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## Abstract

Theorizing the centrality of race remains a key issue within the social sciences. However, an examination of four programs that dominate critical inquiry, particularly in the US context – Racial Formation Theory; Systemic Racism; Color-Blind Racism; and Critical Race Theory – reveal two key problems: a reductivist account of the role of culture in the production of race and racism and the essentializing of the political identity of racial Others. This article, then, considers a different paradigm for the study of race – an *affective* program. Two components of an affective program identified in this article are: (a) a more dynamic account of culture, opening up the realm of the discursive to more than just signification and representation, but also expression; and (b) locating the possibilities of racial politics as matters of racialized and anti-racist *practices* rather than matters of racial identity.

## Keywords

Affect, culture, race, race theory, sociology of culture

## Introduction

Sociology has been explicitly concerned with the question of race since its conception. From the seminal works of DuBois (1968, 1969, 1995), to the clarity provided by the numerous Chicago School studies on the social construction of race (e.g. Bulmer, 1986; McKee, 1993; Park, 1950), to the current era dominated by institutional, comparative-historical, and discursive perspectives (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Feagin, 2006; Omi and Winant, 1994), race continues to be a relevant realm of inquiry, particularly in the US context.

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Yet, despite advancements in both theory and empirical research, two central problems remain when it comes to the study of race and racism. First, despite their best efforts, many social scientific accounts of race and racism maintain a reductionist account of culture's role in the ongoing constitution of race and racism. Second, while contemporary sociological accounts of race and racism almost unilaterally reject race as an essentialist category, the categories scholars construct often reify essentialist political identities of Others.

With these problems in mind, I offer an *affective program* for the study of race.<sup>1</sup> By centering affect as central to the production and maintenance of racial order, I aim to provide a more dynamic account of culture, opening up the realm of the discursive to more than just signification and representation, but also expression (Grossberg, 2010). An affective program for the study of race avoids the essentializing component characteristic of more dominant programs centered on the study of race by locating the possibilities of progressive politics as matters of racialized and anti-racist *practices* rather than matters of racial identity.

In what follows, I summarize four major contemporary programs of race within American sociology: Racial Formation Theory; Systemic Racism; Color-Blind Racism; and Critical Race Theory.<sup>2</sup> Next, I identify two concerns within these programs: (a) the taken-for-grantedness of culture, and (b) the subsequent essentializing of the political identities of racial Others. These concerns frame the proposal of an affective program for the study of race intended to account for the transient, emergent, and dynamic nature of culture in the racialization processes, and to produce a progressive politics of solidarity from outside of essentialist political identity categories of racial Others.

An affective program for the study of race owes its conceptual debt to developments occurring outside of sociology, where attention is being paid to the affective dimension of political and cultural life (Ahmed, 2004b; Anderson, 2006; Clough, 2007; Grossberg, 2010; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2007). These developments include, among many others, a recognition of the singularity of the body-as-organism, rather than the dualism of Mind and Body that has dominated social scientific inquiry (Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Stewart 2007); attention to emergent forms of being and expression brought about by global changes over the past several decades, including global economies centered on the distribution and exchange of affect (Ahmed, 2004b; Hardt and Negri, 2001); and new interest in Deleuzian post-structural theory, including analyses of 'machines of desire' and their various assemblages (Allen, 2011; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; McCann, 2011; Thrift, 2007, 2010).

These interests have produced a body of literature on the centrality of affect for the organization of space (Anderson, 2005; Conradson and McKay, 2007; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Nayak, 2010), and a developing literature in the subfield of the sociology of the body that draws a great deal of its strength from post-colonial studies of desire and desiring processes (Bhabha, 1994; Mohanram, 1999; Stoler, 2006; Wacquant, 2005; Young, 1994). However, unlike the four contemporary

programs, the emergent study of affect has not produced a programmatic approach to its empirical or theoretical enterprise. The literature remains diverse and disconnected, with scholars often talking around or over one another. By offering an affective program of race and racism, I hope to encourage a more uniform consideration of contemporary race relations as fundamentally constituted through the circulation and distribution of affect. This circulation and distribution, or *economy*, of affect facilitates racialization at the macro- and micro-levels (Ahmed, 2004b).

The call for an affective program for the study of race should not be confused with other claims to address the role of affect in social life. Specifically, I'm thinking of Affect Control Theory (ACT), which has a rich tradition within Symbolic Interactionism, and the more general field of the sociology of emotions. While both of these programs are important in their own right, my use of the term 'affect' does not align with either of theirs. An affective program for the sociology of race is not centered on the emotional causes or effects of racialization, as emotions are not affects, but rather qualitatively coded feelings based on shared meanings of a situation (see Ngai, 2005).

Instead, an affective program for the sociology of race is more interested in how particular *affective-cultural assemblages* – defined here as an unstable and changing set of discursive formations and configurations of affective regimes, heterogeneous and often contradictory in their logics, practices, and expressions – produce racial order through their coming together with one another (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Grossberg, 2010; Legg, 2011; Thomas and Brunsma, 2013).

## Contemporary programs for the study of race

Following the first generation of the Chicago School tradition, the sociology of race in the United States suffered from a number of problems, not the least of which was a tendency toward the reduction of race to some other supposedly more 'real' social structure, e.g. ethnicity, class, or nation-hood (McKee, 1993; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2000). Yet, numerous reforms from the modern-day Civil Rights Movement, coupled with international advancements for the rights of minorities around the world, required new attention to be paid toward less overt racial injustice and racism. This new post-Civil Rights period in the US, and post-colonial period abroad, troubled race and racism as ostensible phenomena. Thus, following these developments in both politics and culture, it has been argued the primary dilemma within contemporary approaches to studying race and racism is how to account for race's ubiquity (Winant, 2000: 181).

In surveying the vast amount of literature on race and racism within sociology, four programs are identified that account for the complexity of race and racism in contemporary Western societies, and attempt to foster a critical politics from this complexity. They are Racial Formation Theory, Systemic Racism Theory, Color-Blind Racism, and Critical Race Theory.<sup>3</sup>

### *Racial formation theory*

Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory (RFT) views the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested in the US context. RFT understands racial formation as a historical process occurring at the intersection of different racial 'projects'. A racial project is an ideological representation and explanation of racial dynamics, as well as a structural response of reorganizing and redistributing resources along particular lines of racial differentiation (Omi and Winant, 1994). Thus, when considering racial identity, Omi and Winant (2012: 3) claim that, though we all make our racial identities, we do not do so under circumstances of our own choosing.

RFT sees these intersections as iterative sequences of interpretations of the meaning of race that are open to multiple articulations of agency (Winant, 2000: 182). RFT aims to produce a theory of race and racism that accomplishes three tasks seen as central to any sociological explanation of race: it seeks to provide an adequate comparative-historical analysis of race and racism; it seeks to demonstrate a deeper understanding of macro-micro linkages that contribute to racial issues; and it attempts to recognize the pervasiveness of racial politics in contemporary society (Winant, 2000). To accomplish these things, RFT identifies the State and the realm of politics as the primary mechanisms through which racial formations occur (Omi and Winant, 1994).

The linkage between macro- and micro- within RFT is in how it postulates race as a socializing mechanism. In RFT, becoming a member of a racialized society entails learning to see race. RFT understands race to be an unstable and de-centered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed (Omi and Winant, 1994: 68). For various members of racial groups to understand their roles within this complex set of social meanings, they must develop a somewhat uniform 'Racial common sense' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 60).

### *Systemic racism*

Arguing that racial inequality and oppression have been written into American society through the Constitution and other government policies and procedures, Systemic Racism Theory (SRT) describes the legacies of racial oppression that characterize the United States (Feagin, 2004, 2006). Racial inequalities are attributed specifically to the legacy of chattel slavery, and the wide-scale divestment and redistribution of indigenous American land by a White power structure. This intergenerational transfer of wealth, property, and privilege has created material differences between Whites and non-Whites that inform both experiences and interpretations of social reality (Byng, 2012; Feagin, 2006; Feagin and Elias, 2012; McKittrick, 2012). Further, rearrangements and reforms in US race relations, *de facto* and *de jure*, are simply 'a distraction from more ingrained structural oppressions...that continue to define U.S. society,' (Feagin and Elias, 2012: 21).

SRT argues that, historically, it has been individual, elite White males who have been most directly involved in the maintenance of racial domination (Feagin and Elias, 2012). Elite Whites are depicted throughout history as having power and purposefully executing it to their advantage. Evidence of this claim is demonstrated through the disproportionate representation of Whites in institutions such as government, politics, and business (Feagin, 2006; Feagin and Elias, 2012). Different from RFT, SRT insists that there have only been two racial projects in the history of racialization – that of Whites who seek to maintain the exploitation of people of color, and that of people of color who continue to resist (Feagin and Elias, 2012; Omi and Winant, 2012). Thus, also central to SRT's program for the study of race and racism is the insisting on privileging the epistemologies of historically oppressed groups in their analyses (Feagin, 2006).

### *Color-blind racism*

Color-blind racism (CBR) is a program advanced for the past 15 years (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Like Systemic Racism, CBR emerged out of a strong case made for structural approaches to the study of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 1999). Analysts, it was argued, should conduct comparative research on racialization in a variety of settings, including outside of the United States (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2004), to determine the specific character of racial structure, including the mechanisms, practices, and relations responsible for racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 1999: 904).

CBR asserts the primacy of discursive operations in the continued significance of race and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States. Most recently, the use of 'racial grammar' is employed to demonstrate how racial order in contemporary Western society is reproduced (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Racial grammar shapes how we see or don't see race in social phenomena, and subsequently how we frame matters as related to race, or not related at all. Racial grammar, then, is a distillate of racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Meaning, racial grammar is how we mediate between a racialized ideology and a need to be 'color-blind' in our interactions with other members of society. Focusing predominantly in how racial ideology reproduces racial structure, or racialization, CBR attends to this reproduction as it occurs through *narrative means*, or explicit speech acts. In this model, for ideology to have force it must produce narratives that help to explain the world in ways that make sense to people (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004: 560).

### *Critical race theory*

Critical race theory (CRT) arose from two interdependent phenomena: the perception by some scholars that race was being rejected as an analytic category in the post-Civil rights era (Crenshaw, 1991); and the subsequent development of a 'critical legal studies' tradition meant to examine how US legal institutions contribute to the ongoing racialization of society (Crenshaw et al., 1996). As an umbrella

framework that subsumes a number of different empirical issues, CRT seeks uniformly to demonstrate the lack of material gain for racial minorities in the post-Civil Rights era, despite symbolic victories. Legislating racial equality but failing to enforce it serves as the fuel for critical race theorists, who seek to illuminate the various ways in which the US legal system has failed to provide opportunities for people of color (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 2001; Mills, 1997). For example, the *Brown v. Board* ruling of 1954 is seen as a symbolic victory in legalizing racial equality in US public schools, but at the same time is viewed as a material failure because it failed to actually remove any barriers based on race (Bell, 2005). Not only are schools still segregated, *de facto*, due to practices centered on housing and busing, but *within schools*, unequal conditions remain between whites and racial minorities (Kozol, 1992, 2005).

In addition to documenting racial inequity within various institutions, CRT also seeks to legitimate the work of non-White scholars and their importance to the production of knowledge about race and racism (Byng, 2012). For CRT, it is the work of non-White scholars on race and racism that help illuminate both racial power, and the overall lack of racial progress (Bell, 1995; Byng, 2012; Crenshaw, 2001). Finally, CRT acknowledges the need for cross-pollination across academic disciplines. This cross-pollination, particularly among non-White scholars, is depicted as essential to generating a social movement against racial inequality (Byng, 2012; Crenshaw, 2001).

## Central problems in contemporary paradigms of race

The aforementioned programs in the study of race and racism are all deeply attuned to the historical relationship and ongoing interaction between structure and ideology in the maintenance of contemporary racial order and White rule, as evident from a close reading of their core features. Yet, two central problems emerge from an examination of the tenets of these programs. The first problem has to do with how these programs understand the role of culture in the production of racial order. The second problem, arising from the first, is that, while race is deconstructed as a natural category, it is at the same time essentialized as a political identity.

### *The role of culture in contemporary paradigms*

The first problem is one of culture, or how culture is under-theorized within these programs as simply mediation between reality (there is no such thing as race) and meaning (race is real in its consequences). For example, though Winant (2000) claims that a sociology of culture is necessary for any critical engagement with race and racism, none of the four programs, including Winant's (and Omi's) RFT truly examine culture for its own historical contingency. Instead, culture is assumed, appropriated, generalized, or universalized in attempting to account for its role in the mediation between reality and meaning (see Grossberg, 2010).



Culture, when employed within the frameworks of RFT, SRT, CBR, and CRT, is meant to articulate a mediation of meaning between consciousness and reality. Culture, in this way, is understood as transcendental. It makes reality readily accessible. Overwhelmingly, this occurs through language – be it shared systems of racial grammar (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, 2012), generic ‘common-sense’ understandings of racial order and meaning (Omi and Winant, 1994); or through cognitive frames shared by Whites (Feagin, 2006, 2009). In CRT, culture is articulated as transcendental in its emphasis on particular institutionalized discourses that mediate the reality of racial order – primarily the law, but also education, prison, and the family (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Hopson and Obidah, 2002; King, 1992).

Along with being transcendental, culture is also understood as particularizing in these frameworks. This is evident in CBR, where ‘racial grammar is a *distillate* of racial ideology’ (Bonilla-Silva, 2012: 174 emphasis mine), in RFT’s notion of racial common-sense, and in SRT’s identifying of a White racial frame, where cultural information is theorized as collectively derived and passed down from one generation to the next within racialized groups, providing historical continuity to practices of racialization. In CRT, this is evident in its insistence that the concept of race is the result of shared thoughts on the subject of race. That is, the meaning of race is constructed from beliefs and ideologies surrounding its perceived existence.

Primarily focused on social constructionist theories of reality, RFT, SRT, CBR, and CRT overwhelmingly commit to the following oversimplification: all experience of the world (race and racism), and any possible relation to reality, is: (a) mediated; (b) through human structures (law, family, school, etc.) that are: (c) specific to time and place (e.g. pre-Civil Rights, post-Civil Rights), and which are: (d) expressive in the narrow sense of: (e) signifying and subjectifying, which typically involves ideology, semantics, and cognitive, semiotic, or narrative structures of meaning, i.e. ‘racial grammar’, racial ideology, ‘white racial frame’ (see Grossberg, 2010: 187).

An affective program for the study of race, then, asserts that race scholars need to ‘multiply the modalities, practices, and agencies of mediation,’ (see Grossberg, 2010: 189). This means raising the question of *ontology of mediation*. Such a question frames reality as *only* relational and non-linear. Further, rather than attempting to understand race and racialization through a theory on the social construction of reality, an affective program for the study of race posits a theory of reality constructing itself through multiple series of relations (Grossberg, 2010: 190). Reality, in this sense, is constantly producing itself as the articulation and separation of expression and content (Grossberg, 2010: 190). An affective program does not propose a distinction between reality and meaning. Instead, rather than there being a world existing outside of expression, with expression mediating that relationship, reality produces itself *only through expression*. Meaning-making, then, is not a point of access to reality – it *is* reality (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

An affective program for race does not deny the power of discourse in this ontology of mediation. Instead, discourse should not be reduced to *just* signification and representation. These are only two modes of discursive mediation. A more



expressive vocabulary enables race scholars to describe the different types of agencies and sites of the production, mobilization, deployment, organization, management, and transformation of mediation as a virtual space of possibility (Grossberg, 2010; Massumi, 2002).

For this reason, affect is offered as a theory of mediation because it is a-signifying, non-individualized, non-representational, and non-conscious (Clough, 2007; Thrift, 2007, 2010). This understanding of affect presumes an absence of the more traditional objective/subjective binary implicated not only in the four contemporary programs surveyed in this article, but also, more generally, social theory prior to Foucault (e.g. Mansfield, 2000). If we consider culture not simply as a domain that encompasses practices of racialization, but as an embedded aspect of every practice, articulated through discourse and expression, then the realm of the cultural is the 'relation between the production of the habitual and the specific affective modalities or organizations . . . of a lived reality' (Grossberg, 2010: 1999).

In this framework, then, racialization constitutes a specific type of *affective-cultural assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Grossberg, 2010; Thomas and Brunsma, 2013). Affective-cultural assemblages are affective articulations that produce maps of racialized difference precisely because they operate as apparatuses of othering, producing difference (a network of affective, relational investments) and distance (borders) between racial bodies. These assemblages function as coding machines, actualizing specific ways of belonging *through* affective articulations.

In an affective program for race, the realm of the cultural is an unstable and changing set of discursive formations and configurations of affective regimes, that, when brought into relation with one another, produce affective-cultural assemblages, or racialization. Configurations of intimacy, the private, the public, locality, subjectivity, identity, and embodiment are structured by, and structuring of, racialized discourses, technologies, and even human sensorium (Grossberg, 2010: 223; Thomas and Brunsma, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

In the affective program's framework, racial order, and subsequent racial domination, is an affective-cultural assemblage. In its contemporary formation, it entails an economy of affect. This economy of affect functions through an intensity of attachment that aligns embodied space with social space (Ahmed, 2004a: 119). An economy of affect mediates a relationship between individuals and a collective in concrete ways; and not just discursively, but also through expression (Ahmed, 2004b; Massumi, 1993).

Consider the political economy of fear in the post 9/11 period. Several scholars have noted that discourses of fear are pervasive in the contemporary epoch (Furedi, 2011; Garland, 2001; Torres and Kyriakides, 2012). Functioning as a technology of governance, fear was perpetuated through a language of threats – threats to American values, threats to safety and security, and threats to a particular American way of life that is identified with dominant racial order (e.g. Ahmed, 2004b). These threats then served as the justification for national policies targeted toward the detention of anyone suspected of being a potential terrorist (Ahmed, 2004b: 74–75), with 'terrorism' functioning as a code for racial difference. It was

(and still is) this threat of a crisis in security, not an actual crisis, that produced justification for new forms of security, policing, and surveillance targeted toward specific racial bodies (Ahmed, 2004b; Massumi, 1993, 2002). As these new forms of policing, security, and surveillance emerged, they established the corporeal and social abilities of various racial bodies, including the abilities among and between one another (Lim, 2010).

It is important to keep in mind that the power and productivity of this economy of fear is found within its ambience (see Hubbard, 2003). The organization of racial order post 9/11 was produced through the maintenance of a low-level fear that was quickly naturalized, rather than collective hysteria or panic (Massumi, 1993). Consider the United States' Department of Homeland Security's Advisory System, or more commonly known as the color-coded terror alert system. Implemented in March of 2002, the advisory system was touted by the Bush administration as 'the foundation for building a comprehensive and effective communications structure for the dissemination of information regarding the risk of terrorist attacks' (White House Press Release, March 2002). Ranging from green (low risk of terror) to red (severe risk of terror), this system, in operation until April of 2011, maintained a consistent threat of terror, or fear, even in the absence of any real danger. Evidence of this ambient fear is found in the press release from the US Department of Homeland Security following the London train bombings, from 7 July 2005:

... The United States government is raising the threat level from Code Yellow, or Elevated, to Code Orange, High; targeted only to the mass transit portion of the transportation sector — and I want to emphasize that — targeted only to the mass transit portion of the transportation sector. This includes regional and inner city passenger rail, subways, and metropolitan bus systems. We are also asking for increased vigilance throughout the transportation sector.... Currently, the United States has no specific, credible information suggesting an imminent attack here in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Here, fear was used as a form of governmentality meant to control the movement of bodies between and among borders by positing the movement of certain racialized bodies as *a potential, yet immanent*, threat to the safety of others. Similar articulations of this affective-cultural assemblage are evidenced in the naturalization of a debate within the US on whether the Mexico-US are secure enough, rather than a debate about what the actual threat is to those borders; and in the naturalization of the threat of possible voter fraud as a means of enacting racially targeted voter ID laws across multiple US states despite no evidence that voter ID fraud poses a threat to American democracy.

This understanding of fear is fundamentally different than that of other scholars, who have posited fear largely as a negative force (e.g. Furedi, 2011; Garland, 2001). Garland (2001: 10), for example, argues that, post 9/11, distinctive policies have been developed that aim to reduce fear levels by playing up notions of safety.

Yet, as the above press release (and several others) from the DHS demonstrates, these policies do not aim to reduce fear levels as much as they aim to *constitute* fear as a relational force. Fear, then, does not reflect an absence of safety, as it might in the Freudian sense (e.g. Furedi, 2011; see Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). Fear here is a positive force, inscribing the very types of relations that differential bodies can have with one another. Fear, as an affective-cultural assemblage, modulates difference and distance among social groups in the post 9/11 era.

An economy of fear is useful to demonstrate the cultural component for an affective program of race and racism for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates a mechanism for producing racial order that does not neatly fit into rational or analytic categories typified by dominant theories of race. Fear is fundamentally a mechanism that operates at the affective register, inscribing itself within racial bodies, affecting them and their interactions with others. But, it does not belong to those bodies. Fear is non-particularizing. Nor does fear work upon bodies in similar ways. Fear is non-transcendental.

Post 9/11, fear has inscribed itself into the bodies of many Americans through its sticking to the specific bodies of Arab-, Asian-, and Hispanic-Americans (see Ahmed, 2004b). Fear does not belong to one particular institution, but works its way through a number of institutions. Fear does not simply exist in structural terms, nor does it only operate discursively (e.g. Furedi, 2011). It operates affectively – meaning while it can manifest itself through discourse and structure, it can also transcend those elements. Fear is not meant to mediate between reality and meaning, but, through expression, constitutes reality. Fear consists of a number of practices and technologies which function to configure both difference and distance for the American public in very historically specific ways, making it useful for comparative analysis with other affective-cultural assemblages of racialization (e.g. shame, guilt, or desire).

### *The essentialist political other in contemporary paradigms of race*

The second problem inherent in the four programs identified in this article has to do with the contradiction between the simultaneous deconstruction of race as a real concept and the active construction of an essentialist political identity of the Other.

It is generally accepted across the social and natural sciences that race has no basis in biology. It is also generally accepted across the social and natural sciences that race is a social and cultural construct. Thus, it has been accepted across disciplines that the effects of racialization are very much real despite the fact that race itself is not. However, when it comes to articulating a political position, or advocating a progressive racial politics, the four programs on race all reify an essentialist political category of the Other in uncritical ways.

For example, Omi and Winant (2012) have demonstrated that SRT's use of racial categories is imprecise. In SRT, 'Whites' refers to all Whites, White elites, dominant Whites, and anti-racist Whites (Feagin and Elias, 2012; Hughey and Byrd, 2013). In addition, when discussing the 'white racial frame' and the

maintenance of racism, SRT attempts to name elite whites as a matter of rhetorical strategy (Feagin, 2006, 2009). Yet the very process of naming essentializes both Whites and non-Whites as political identities, limiting the agency of each. The concept, White racial frame, becomes overdetermining in the process. Elite Whites in SRT unquestionably have the 'White racial frame', and use it to their advantage, while others fight to resist its dominance.

Though Omi and Winant (2012) are critical of SRT, RFT also suffers from a similar issue. In RFT, racial common sense operates as the socializing mechanism for how social actors come to understand race appears. At first glance, racial common sense appears to be a useful way of thinking about how social actors learn the significance of race. Upon closer examination, however, this becomes problematic.

Omi and Winant (1994: 68) articulate race as an unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed, and primarily through political conflict. If this is the case, the mechanisms that produce racial common sense would not act uniformly, nor would common-sense remain common for long. Omi and Winant (2012) discuss the shiftiness of racial and racist projects, yet do not specify how this impacts the socialization of race over time in a consistent manner. How a racial or racist project – a historically contingent process itself – can develop any sort of trajectory of racial common sense is not well attended to in RFT. This makes it difficult to identify any set of 'core' criteria that contribute to a truly common understanding of racial order in *any period*, let alone how racial common sense shifts partially or entirely in the space between racial or racist projects.

In examining CBR, the attribution of particular racial frames to specific social actors essentializes the very categories that CBR attempts to illuminate as social constructs, meaning it succumbs to similar problems as SRT in this regard. On the one hand, race and racism are actively being constructed through discursive properties, as social inventions. Yet, on the other hand, Whites display their views, attitudes, and stories of race and racism as a means of maintaining privilege *because* Whites are at the top of the racial order (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2004: 559). Meanwhile, social actors at the bottom of the racial order are more likely to exhibit oppositional views, attitudes, and counter-narratives.

The location of these racial identities is relatively static in the CRB framework, and the only real degree of fluidity is in speech-acts themselves, but not the identity locations they structure. How the deployment of discourse provides for movement among and between racial categories is not sufficiently dealt with in CBR. When taken to its limits, we are left with the following dilemma: an acknowledgement of the biological fallacy of race, yet predetermined racial categories with no movement between categories for social actors.

To complicate matters further, within CBR progressive political action involves challenging racial rule through: (1) individual actions by essentialized political identities (e.g. racial groups) targeted toward outing other essentialized political categories (e.g. racial groups and racism); and (2) a grassroots social movement

constituted by racially oppressed groups as well as White 'race-traitors'. In both instances, the challenge to White racial authority is first to name the perpetrators into existence by racial identification, and then name the revolutionaries into existence through the same method. But even CBR analysts acknowledge the dynamic complexity of intersectionality, and the complications this creates for generating collective action along racial, class, and gendered lines of division (Bonilla-Silva, 2009: 232–233).

CRT perhaps is the most reflexive of the dominant programs of race, openly contesting the notion of a unitary category of difference (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 1996). Recall the tenet of anti-essentialism in CRT, which denies any single unitary identity for an individual and a group (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). But, also recall that CRT asserts people of color have a unique voice that can communicate to Whites matters that Whites may not be aware of regarding racism and racial privilege. These two assertions are theoretically incompatible with one another. If there is no unitary identity, then the voices of minorities become impossible to coalesce into a unified anti-racist platform. Further, to whom are they speaking? The category of Whiteness would be as anti-essential as any other racial category, making it almost impossible to name specific perpetrators of racial injustice, as done in SRT and CBR.

What I've illuminated above is not new to scholars who study race and racism. Much has been written on identity politics and its pragmatic shortcomings (e.g. Crenshaw, 1991; Lipsitz, 2006). Further, there is enormous debate surrounding whether a politics centered on identity can ultimately be successful given the contingent, fluid, and emergent nature of identities, including their various intersections (e.g. Rockquemore et al., 2009; Strathausen, 2009). How, for instance, can a politics of solidarity be fostered among working-class Blacks and Whites when their agency is theorized as bounded to their race, class, and gender? Critical developments in postcolonial theory trouble this matter further by, in part, examining how racial order is maintained by racial Others, over and among racial others, through a variety of psycho-social-affective practices (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 2008; Young, 1994).

In sum, we lack a language that can suggest new ways of being-in-community with one another to tackle the issue of race without reproducing static categories of sameness and difference. To this end, an affective program for the study of race provides a racial politics centered not on notions of racial identity (sameness and difference), but instead on notions of shared spaces and practices.

## **Toward an affective program for race**

Political agency within an affective program is not something that belongs simply to subjectivity, but is instead constituted by a system of collective practices within a shared space (Grossberg, 2010). Attending to affect entails attending to matters of belonging rather than questions of being (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). People do indeed live identity, but as Gregg and Seigworth note,

that identity as it is predominantly theorized is always bound up with difference and negativity in an overdetermining Hegelian logic (2010: 234).

An affective program offers a way out of this essentialist process by examining race as a *felt* process (Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010). As a relational category, race is made in the forces generated between interacting social actors. Lim (2010: 2398), for instance, writes that historical investigations into the processes that establish what bodies can and cannot do (or should and should not do) are likely to reveal a variety of means through which the social and biological properties of a body produce racial order. These properties of a body are contextually contingent processes, the result of specific social, cultural, and political processes. Further, these processes are fundamentally affective in that they determine how a body can affect, and be affected by, other bodies. The historical examination of the production, transformation, and diffusion across space and time of the social and biological functions of a body has the potential to illuminate the processes of race and racialization without reproducing essential categories of difference and sameness by centering the fluidity-over-time of these categories as the analytic focus.

A re-reading of anti-miscegenation laws provides a relevant example of Lim's (2010) thesis. First introduced in North America in the late 1600s and later codified by several of the original colonies, these laws explicitly aimed to prevent the mixing of Whites with other racial groups. While several scholars have noted the significance of anti-miscegenation laws for regulating property and inheritance among Whites (Pascoe, 2010), for functioning as apologetics for the rape of women of color (Hodes, 1999), and for policing borders of social norms (Mitchel, 2003), Lim's (2010) insights offer the opportunity for a complementary, yet different, read.

One of the overarching concerns found within anti-miscegenation laws was not simply the actual encounter between White women and men of color (which these laws aimed to prevent), but of the *threat* such an encounter posed to the biological possibilities resulting from that encounter. During the 18th and 19th centuries, as these laws became more common among the growing number of states in the USA, the notion of biracial offspring shifted from being a theological concern to an unwanted genetic condition that could affect the very sanctity and safety of the nation (Gilman, 1985; Hiraldo, 2003; Mohanram, 1999). In this manner, the social and biological capabilities of particular bodies were repudiated and controlled in ways that both created and then maintained a particular racial order that was fundamentally tied to notions of nationhood, safety, and security. Miscegenation presented a legitimate threat to the health of the nation, which was fundamentally tied to representations of healthy bodies as exclusively White. By preventing reproductive encounters between racial categories, these laws denounced particular embodied encounters, and served to establish the affective capabilities of both Whites and non-Whites.

A re-reading of anti-miscegenation laws demonstrates that the world of embodied relations involves practices and techniques of differentiation, both explicit and covert (e.g. Conradson and McKay, 2007; Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010). But within the general and varied field of embodied relations there also exists the



potential of embodied ethical practices constituted through affective modes of being (Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010). These are instances, often times fleeting and transient, where anti-racist action can be asserted into everyday life (Anderson, 2006; Thrift, 2007; Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010) but not be predicated upon having a particular marker of racial identity.

Interestingly, some of the literature within CBR provides examples of these types of practices, though they are not necessarily identified as such. Mobilizing large numbers of minorities for the purposes of disrupting White spaces is a common theme running through the suggestions for an anti-racist politics of protest (Bonilla-Silva, 2009: 236). Minorities attending all-White churches in mass, Black business leaders submitting their resumes, collectively, to firms on Wall Street, and interracial couples holding court in the public spaces of historically White colleges and universities are all offered as methods for disrupting the dominant racial order. I don't disagree that these collective actions would constitute a disruption to the status quo, nor do I deny that they are a means to achieving some aspects of racial justice. But, they still succumb to essentializing political identities of race in order to produce anti-racist action.

Like Bonilla-Silva (2009), I too, believe creative expression (e.g. humor), has the potential to disrupt the status quo. Creative expression can be effective not because it is simply different from the normative approach, however, but precisely because it works at the affective register, and often produces a sustained ambivalence among its audiences. It is a *practice-oriented* enterprise for producing collective action, rather than an identity-oriented enterprise. An economy of ambivalence (e.g. Ahmed, 2004b) could potentially foster a critical consciousness because of the embodied disrupture caused by the simultaneous presence of two oppositional valences within a given cultural space (see Lavine et al., 2012). And, ambivalence does not require the creation of essential racial categories for its deployment. Rather, ambivalence is often the result of particular practices and expressions that run counter to the expectations in a given cultural context.

An affective program for the study of race, then, ends with an advocacy for practices that foster ambivalence toward racial order. These practices can include those mentioned already, such as humor, but should also aim to produce scholarship on attempts to generate ambivalence so that a body of literature can be built around successful and unsuccessful attempts to engage in anti-racist work in a variety of cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I have attempted in this article to lay out some of the key differences between existing programs for the study of race in contemporary sociology and the affective program that I propose here. Though I acknowledge the debt owed to Racial Formation Theory, Systemic Racism Theory, Color-Blind Racism, and Critical Race Theory, two causes for concern frame my proposed program: the undertheorization of culture in these programs, and the essentializing of political



racial categories while simultaneously asserting the biological fallacy of race. As a remedy, an affective program for the study of race proposes a re-thinking of culture not as a mediation between reality and meaning-making, but rather as expressions of meaning-making that constitute reality (see Grossberg, 2010). Further, an affective program for race is centered on empirical investigations of the affective-cultural assemblages, both in historical and contemporary contexts, that constitute race and racial order – assemblages of fear, desire, intimacy, public/private, locality, etc.

There is no doubt that similar investigations exist in scholarship across the humanities and social sciences (e.g. Ahmed, 2004b; Anderson, 2005; Daynes and Lee, 2008; Nayak, 2010; Stoler, 2006; Wacquant, 2005; Young, 1994). However, a unifying theme, or set of themes, is missing that would allow for the development of a strong program of affect in the study of race. The two contributions of a proposed program that I have put forth in this article – a more robust theory of culture and the emphasis on affective-cultural assemblages in the constitution of race and racial order – are the beginnings of that strong program.

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### Notes

1. Readers should note that the use of the term 'program' rather than 'theory' is intentional, and is meant to attend to the differences between a theory, which is a specific explanatory framework for a set of social phenomena, and a program, which is a much more open-ended position on how inquiry should proceed. While there are dozens of theories in sociology that deal with the issue of race (symbolic, ethnographic, discursive, intersectional) there are only a handful of programs that have a unifying set of principles and practices from which to proceed with analysis and theory.
2. The page limits of a journal article will, inevitably, constrict how in-depth the summaries for these four programs are. As such, for the reader who believes my summaries are simply caricatures, I welcome a healthy debate on the matter.
3. In a recent article from *Critical Sociology*, Byng (2012) also identifies these four paradigms as central to the sociological study of race.
4. For how human sensorium becomes configured through affective-cultural assemblages of racism, see Thomas and Brunsma (2013) in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
5. See <http://www.dhs.gov/homeland-security-advisory-system>, accessed 17 June 2013.

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